



Bull Management

Bull Management: Vaccinations and Health

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Biosecurity

Bull Vaccination

Breeding Ability

Maternal Sire

Bulls should be on a good health care program, just like your cow herd. According to Dr. Ron Skinner, a veterinarian/breeder near Hall, Mont., there are four things that can play major roles in cattle health and the fertility of a bull — nutrition, genetics, disease and stress — that make the animal more vulnerable to disease.

“Reproduction in a bull is no better than the weakest link in that chain,” Skinner says. If any of these factors create a problem, fertility will be compromised. The bull may be infertile or may have suboptimal fertility.

A low pregnancy rate in the first half of the breeding season in the cows being bred by a certain bull may be the result of suboptimal fertility due to any one of those factors.

“If you have a bull in a single sire group that is not getting as many cows settled as he should, it could be that he’s not as fertile as he should be, due to a weak link in that chain,” he explains. “The bull may not have optimal fertility because he is exhausting

his semen supply and is not producing semen as well as he should — because of one of those factors. If a bull is being used very heavily, usually a seven-day rest will bring him back to full speed, regarding semen count or production. Rotating bulls in and out of the cow herd (in for a week, out for a week) is not a bad strategy, but if a bull is healthy, heavy use is not damaging to his reproductive abilities — unless he injures himself.”

A bull may deplete his semen supply under heavy use but should be able to come right back with a short rest, even just an overnight rest if he bred only two to three cows that day, since there are always more sperm developing. If a bull is trying to breed numerous cows each day and is worn down nutritionally, however, this is the bull that needs to be out for a week, not just overnight.

Getting ‘em ready

“Bulls need to be vaccinated before breeding season. Often they are neglected or left behind in all the cattle processing. Then

it comes time to turn the bulls out and people realize they haven’t been vaccinated. Bulls should be vaccinated well ahead of the breeding season,” Skinner explains.

It’s not wise to vaccinate bulls the day you turn them out. Depending on the age of the bull and what you vaccinate for, the time it takes for immunity to develop after vaccination can vary. A booster shot does not take as long as a first-time shot. If the bull has stress, or reactions from vaccination, this may compromise his abilities for a while during the start of breeding, depending on the vaccine.

“IBR vaccine, for instance, should be given long enough ahead of time that the animal, if stressed, can get past any recrudescence of the IBR virus and any shedding of the virus. This may take two weeks, but if you give the vaccine 30 days ahead of time the bull should no longer be shedding by the time you turn him out,” says Skinner. “Some people will tell you it’s better to vaccinate at least 60 days ahead, so that if the

bull has a fever, he’ll have a new batch of sperm cells by breeding time. But the bull will be going through a stress period as soon as he goes out with the cows, that first 30 days, and he needs some immunity. We find that IBR recrudesces in a cow during the stress of estrus, and if you are going into a herd with a bull that is not properly vaccinated, he is apt to be challenged from that cow herd.”

You want the bull to have peak immunity to protect him during that first 30 days, as well as no temporary impairments from his own vaccination that might hinder his fertility or ability to breed cows at this crucial time, so vaccinate him several weeks ahead of turnout.

In many cases you will be vaccinating semi-annually (fall and spring), depending on the risks for certain diseases in your area and your veterinarian’s advice. So plan ahead and have a good vaccination program for the bulls, just as you would your cows. **HW**

